The Baby's Victory

By Henry L. Sabin.

The west-bound "Atlantic Express" was running toward Chicago—rattling over bridges, roaring through cuts and dashing contemptuously past the small, unimportant stations. The afternoon was drab and dreary, the landscape traversed by the road never had great claims to attractiveness, and to-day the absence of contrasting light and shade completely stripped it of its even mediocre interests. A drizzly fog had settled upon the world, cloaking with gray the fields and woods and buildings and brushing the car windows with a provoking mist.

With one exception the passengers were dull and disgruntled. Nothing was to be seen outside, and little inside. Even the train-boy had subsided into gloomy despair, recognizing the futility of trying to dispose of his wares to such an unresponsive company.

The only trace of animation in evidence adown the aisle of the whole train was found in the coach behind the smoker. Here a baby lustily protested against goodness knows what, and here a group of sympathizing kin endeavored to comfort him. Certainly he could not rightly complain of neglect. He was being regaled with attentions the most solicitous, and especially from his custodian—a girl of fifteen, who patted him and danced him and tempted him with an endless variety of distractions. But her wiles were in vain. He refused to be turned aside from the shrill recital of his woes, real or imaginary.

Occupying a double seat opposite, Horace Kilroy, general superintendent of the western division of the road, fumed and remonstrated under his breath. He repented having come into one of the ordinary coaches, but, on the other hand, how otherwise was he to pursue his pet method of keeping posted on all the workings of his department? He argued that unless he sometimes doffed his official privilege of private car and pass, and rode on a ticket, like everybody else, he could not gain the complete knowledge which he was after. He was thus brought into close contact with patrons and employes, and if he was enabled to remain incognito so much the better.

In truth, the indulgences of his hobby had its disadvantages also, and was now putting the finishing polish on what he considered to be the most disagreeable trip he ever had taken over his line. But he was determined to stick it out. He had encountered a number of offending hatters in both management and manners, and he was headed homeward with his notebook full of memoranda which boded ill for his subalterns.

In The Chicago office the force of clerks was waiting in fear and trembling the arrival of the executive. From a single curt, decisive message addressed to the chief clerk all apprehended that trouble was in store for somebody. Whenever the general superintendent came back cross and nervous his immediate subjects paid the penalty for being present.

Superintendent Kilroy gazed on the baby as on an intolerable nuisance. He made a resolve that he would propose to the management of the system the introduction, as an experiment, of a special coach, noise-proof, for the conveyance of babies and party. No doubt the traveling public would hail this as a blessed inovation.

Perhaps he would favor the prohibiting the carrying of children without an adult escort. Here was a case in point across the aisle. Reclining half at length in his corner, from beneath his hat tipped over his eyes he wrathfully scrutinized the "case." Five children unattended—one a baby, and the eldest one a mere chit—outrageous. Had a mother or other mature person been with them of course that baby would not be acting so; it would be quiet somehow. The superintendent possessed vague ideas concerning babies, he being a bachelor.

The little family obtruded itself upon the superintendent's observation rather more than he desired. He could shut it out from neither sight nor hearing. The fact was very irritating. He was of the opinion that at least two of the children badly needed washing. Yet conscientiously he could not blame the busy young body in charge.

She herself was disheveled, but was doing her best. She had a worried, motherly way about her that was quite at variance with the two slender flaxen braids hanging down her back. Her face was round and pink, and her eyes were clear gray-blue. She wore a plain, sober-colored frock, with none of those pretty ribbons and dainty tucks so dear to the heart of any girl. However, she bore an air of neatness, as much neatness as was compatible with the intimate supervision of four active juniors—a miss of eight, a miss of six, a rogue of three, and a regular rascal assuredly, no more than ten months. With these to right and to left and in front and a huge telescope bag threatening her from the rack above—ah, what a plight, even were not the baby crying incessantly?

Imbued with the firm conviction that not only infants, but all children, should be restricted to that car which he had in project, finally the superintendent desperately appealed to what few winks he simply must have despite of the undimished shrieks. He had just succeeded in skirting the threshold of Nod when a light touch on his hand lying on the cushioned seat disturbed him again. He opened his eyes and saw one of the smaller of his neighbors standing at his knee, and looking with awe at his kid gloves, He impatiently drew in his hand (the boy's hands were sticky), and his visitor retreated, alarmed.

"Ah! Ah! A-a-a-ah!" the baby was shouting.

The superintendent, now wide awake, knew that sleep would not approach him again with these conditions prevailing. He had lost his opportunity, and he grumbled and kicked his feet with impotent wrath.

Although one after another of her band, with the exception of the infant, was constantly at the ice water tank, and each time brought back, as in duty bound, the tin cup for her use, it was a question whether the head of the flock derived much benefit from these efforts. The passage of the cup was hazardous with so many lurches and other disastrous experiences! Besides, she divided with the baby. At last she could no longer resist thirst aggravated from time to time by a few drops, and she ventured an expedition on her own account.

Ostensibly the baby was left in the care of the three remaining children, but in reality, owing to the fact that this trio at once shyly followed the leader up the aisle, he was abandoned to his fate. Promptly he rolled off the seat, into the aisle, and almost under the dismayed superintendent. There was nothing else to do—the superintendent stooped and gingerly rescued him. The baby's cries had been interrupted by the accident, and they did not now recommence. He stared blankly at his preserver. Each was afraid of the other.

The state of mental apprehension was relieved by the flurried reappearance of the youthful nurse. With a flushed countenance she hastened to lighten the superintendent of the burden lying so awkwardly in his arms. To her overtures the baby responded with an energetic scream of objection.

"Sh-sh-sh!" said the girl. "Come, now."

"It seems to prefer me, doesn't it?" huskily admitted the superintendent, set back by the change of programme. The baby, clinging to him with astonishing strength, was quiet once more.

"Yes sir," replied the girl, with embarrassed shyness.

"Perhaps I'd better keep it awhile, if that will stop its crying. Maybe it will go to sleep," he suggested, seizing on a possible reprieve for himself and his suffering neighbor.

"I don't know, sir," answered the girl, doubtfully.

"Well, we'll see," he continued looking down at the small being on his lap. "Am I holding it right?"

"Yes, sir;" he doesn't mind having his legs twisted a little," assured the girl. "When he goes to sleep you can lay him down. But I think I ought to take him."

"No, indeed," interposed the superintendent, in memory hearing those appalling sounds renewed.

He sat there stiffly, bolt upright, not daring to move, the baby clasped in his arms, and he felt very silly. This was the first baby that he ever had handled, and he was over forty. On his part the baby was peering up with all his might, but his eyes were becoming drowsy.

"You can sit here if you like, where you can watch," said the superintendent to the girl, indicating the seat facing him. "You don't mind riding backward?" he added, politely.

"Oh, no, sir," she declared; and she slipped in. The other three children, who had formed a wondering audience, crowded and clamored after her.

"Where are you going?" inquired the superintendent.

"Fargo, in Dakota," she replied, her manner not yet free from timidity.

"We've lost all our money." vouchsafed Miss Eight-year-old, frankly.

"That's too bad! How did it happen?" asked the superintendent.

"I don't know, sir," said the older girl. "Only after we got on this train I found I didn't have any more."

"And what will you do?" pursued the superintendent.

"Our tickets take us to Chicago, and when we get there I'll telegraph papa," she returned proudly.

"And where's papa?" persisted the superintendent.

"Why, he's in Dakota, on a farm, and he's to meet us in Fargo."

"But I'm afraid you can't telegraph to Fargo without money to pay for the message; and, besides, how is he to know there's a telegram for him?" excepted the superintendent.

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, puzzled for a moment, but nevertheless undaunted.

"Papa'll send us money," trustfully affirmed Miss Eight-year-old, squirming against the superintendent's knees.

"Be careful, Hilda. you'll wake baby!" admonished the girl. "I guess you can lay him down now, sir, if you do it gently. He's asleep, I think."

The superintendent cautiously obeyed the recommendation. The operation was conducted to a successful completion, and the thoroughly subdued infant slumbered peacefully on the crimson cushion. Mr. Kilroy was more at ease immediately. Nevertheless, with baby on the same seat, a child at his knee, two others wriggling at the window at his elbow, and a girl, who really was only a child, as his vis-a-vis, his position continued to be most extraordinary—for him. And yet, strange to say, he found that his ill-humor was fast vanishing.

"So this is Hilda?" he asked. "Then what is your name?"

"Louise—Louise Swansson. And that is Gusta, and that is John, and the baby is Peter."

"Mamma's dead," announced Hilda, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Yes," explained Louise, with growing assurance in her new acquaintance. "We lived in Byport, Pennsylvania, and papa went out to Dakota over a year ago, and when mamma died he sent for us to come to him; he was counting on having us all as soon as he got settled." Louise's eyes filled with tears.

"Well, well, that's a long journey—and just you in charge!" ejaculated the superintendent.

"Say—I like you!" stated Hilda, candidly thrusting her hand into his.

This frank avowal rather startled the superintendent, who was not used to such overtures. "Thank you," he answered reservedly, not wishing to court further advances from the susceptible but grimy young lady.

Futile was his dodging. In an instant, without warning, came an attack from another quarter. Master John it was who unceremoniously plumped down upon his lap and affectionately embraced him.

"Oh, Johnnie, don't!" pleaded Louise, horrified at the audacity.

"Never mind; let him stay," spoke the superintendent, bravely.

Johnnie stayed, to be joined within a moment by Gusta, equally as embitious.

Said the grinning brakeman, who long ago had recognized the official, but had pretended ignorance, to the conductor, who also was in the secret, "Look at the 'old man' will you! Regular happy family, isn't he! Somebody ought to take a photograph of him!"

Could the superintendent's many friends and associates, business and social, have seen him thus engaged when the train pulled into Chicago they would have gazed agape, thunderstruck, nearly incredulous. And the sight of this same superintendent conveying those children into the station would have clapped the climax!

"You're to stay here, remember, until five o'clock," he instructed, when all had been safely enconced upon a seat in the waiting-room. "One of the men in red caps will tell you when your train is ready—and I'll see to it that they take you to Fargo."

"Do you own all the railroads?" asked Hilda, admiringly.

"Not quite, Hilda," he replied. "Goodbye!"

On his way to the door he beckoned to a station attendant. "George," he directed, "you see those children over there—four and a baby. Look after them, will you, please? They're friends of mine—going to Fargo, and I'll depend on you to put them aboard the five o'clock L & D, and George," handing him a dollar, " you might get some sandwiches and oranges and other truck. They've lost their money, Children always want to eat, I believe."

"Yes, sir; I'll look after them, Mr. Kilroy, sure," asserted the man.

With this the superintendent hurried to the curb, sprang into a cab, and was whirled off to his office.

All the day the atmosphere throughout his suite had been depressing, for it was suspected that he was returning in a temper which meant a general and brusque upheaval. No clerk, however humble, but feared that the first victim of displeasure might be himself. The superintendent's heel's striking sharply along the floor of the corridor were heard in the outer office, and by that subtle species of wireless telegraphy termed "intuition" the word was passed from desk, "The old man' is coming!"

He opened the door—and he was whistling! Actually whistling! As he strode through his own private apartment he whistled on! The clerks glanced at one another in relieved surprise. A smile showed here and there, and it seemed as if the sun were shining again. Hardly had Mr. Kilroy entered his sanctum ere he rang his bell impatiently.

"Send in Johnson," he ordered.

Johnson, not entirely devoid of foreboding, obeyed the summons.

"I want you to make out an application—in the usual way—to the L. & D. for transportation to Fargo—charge to my account—for Louise Swansson and family, S-w-a-n-s-s-o-n—got it? All right. Go over with it yourself and wait for the pass, and take it down to the station and give it to Miss Swansson. She's in the ladies' waiting-room with three children and a baby. She's to go out on the five-o'clock. A girl of fifteen, three other